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STEUBEN AND THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI

4 Steuben

By Edgar Erskine Hume

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By Hugh Hastings Hume

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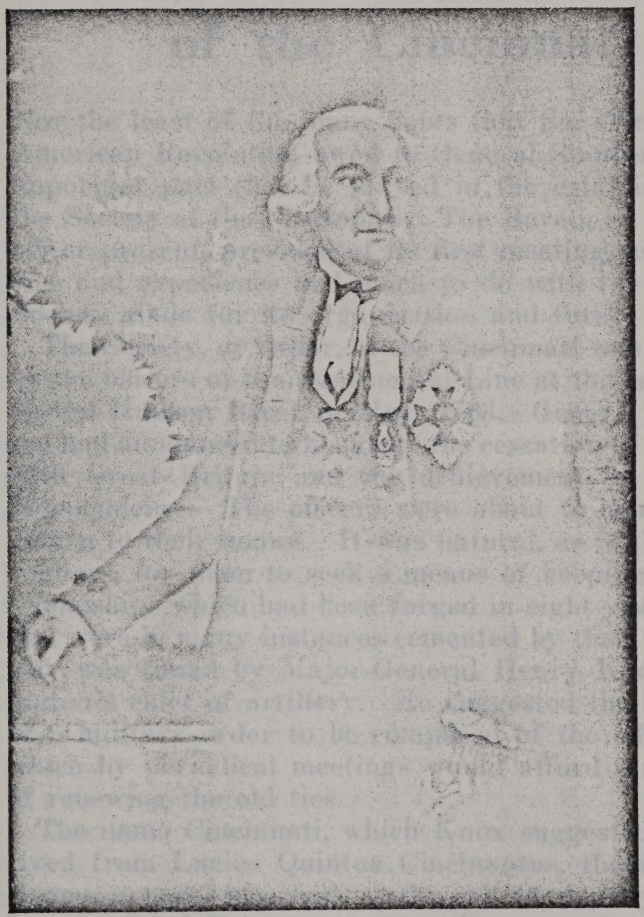

Major-General Frederick William,
Baron von Steuben, 1730-1794

Inspector General of the Continental Army

Portrait by Andrews
in the Public Library, Steubenville, Ohio

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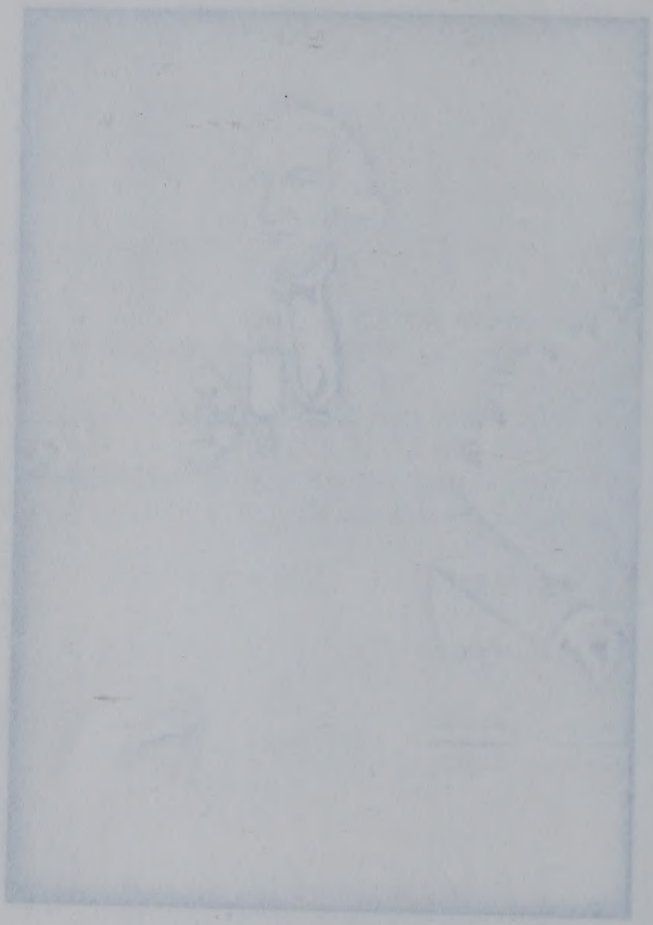


Major-General Frederick William,
Baron von Steuben. 1730-1795
Inspector General of the Continental Army

Portrait by Audubon
in the Public Library, Steubenville, Ohio

Mr. George W. Gale
Chicago

Steuben and the Society of the Cincinnati

Not the least of the many debts that the officers of the American Revolution owed to General Steuben, was the important part that he played in the establishment of the Society of the Cincinnati. The Baron, as the senior officer present, presided at its first meeting, and his advice and experience had much to do with the plans the Society made for its organization and future existence.

The Society, or Order, of the Cincinnati was instituted by the officers of the Continental Line at the cantonment on the Hudson River in May, 1783. General Washington had announced to his army the cessation of hostilities with Great Britain and the achievement of American independence. The officers were about to separate and return to their homes. It was natural, as is the way of soldiers, for them to seek a means of keeping alive the friendships which had been forged in eight years of war and were in many instances cemented by their blood. A way was found by Major-General Henry Knox, Washington's chief of artillery. He suggested the formation of a military order to be composed of the officers, and which by periodical meetings would afford opportunity of renewing the old ties.

The name Cincinnati, which Knox suggested, was derived from Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus, the illustrious Roman general who had, at the call of country, left his farm and led Roman arms to victory, and, when that victory had been achieved, had returned again to his farm, refusing the honors proffered him by a grateful senate. The Cincinnati set themselves the duty of "laying down in peace arms assumed for public defense," as the *Institution* expresses it.

That General Knox had long contemplated the establishment of a society composed of the officers of the Continental Army, is seen in a passage in Jefferson's diary. As early as 1776 Knox had "in the course of conversation expressed the wish for some ribbon to wear in his hat or in his buttonhole, to be transmitted to his descendants as a badge and proof that he had fought in defense of their liberties. He spoke of it in such precise terms as showed he had revolved it in his mind before."

The hardships of the Continental Army did not end with the Revolution. The men were without money. Their pleas for pay long overdue were met by a temporizing policy and complaints of an exhausted exchequer on the part of Congress. The disaffection of the camp ran high, being aroused by the notorious "Newburgh Address," now known to have been written by Major John Armstrong. Anything might have happened. The influence of Washington was never more needed and never more manifest. It was at this juncture that the Society of the Cincinnati was instituted.

A general meeting of all officers took place on May 13, 1783, in General Steuben's headquarters, The Verplanck Mansion at Fishkill-on-the-Hudson. General Steuben, the senior officer, presided, and Captain Samuel Shaw of the Massachusetts Line, acted as secretary. The minutes, in Captain Shaw's handwriting and signed by Steuben as President, are preserved in the Society's extensive archives.

At this meeting a document known as the *Institution* was adopted commemorating the "vast event" of the War of Independence and organizing the officers of the American army to perpetuate its remembrance and the friendships which had been formed under the pressure of common danger. Provision was made for the perpetuation of membership through the eldest sons or next heirs male of members and so on, according to the law of primogeniture. Funds were subscribed for the assistance of members and their families who might be in need.

On June 19, 1783, the Society accepted a design for the badge or Eagle of the Order which was "certified by the Baron de Steuben,* President of the Convention," and ordered to be deposited in the archives of the Society, as "the original from which all copies are to be made . . ." The sketch, bearing Steuben's signature across the top, is preserved in the archives in keeping with this resolution.

At the same meeting His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief was requested to become President General of the new Order. On the following day a committee, consisting of Generals Heath, Knox, and Steuben, waited upon General Washington and informed him of the desires of the Cincinnati. General Washington, whose conduct had so strikingly resembled that of Cincinnatus of old, accepted the honor and continued to serve the Society as its President General until his death. He was succeeded by General Alexander Hamilton, and he in turn by General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and General Thomas Pinckney. In all there have been but twelve holders of this high office in the Society's more than a century and a half of existence.

It was decided to admit to membership the French and other foreign officers who had served in the American War of Independence, and the King of France gave permission for his officers to wear the Eagle, though at that time other foreign orders were not permitted in France. The Eagle was also worn in a number of other European countries, including Germany, Poland, Russia, and Sweden. The French branch of the Cincinnati became dormant with the Reign of Terror, but has since been revived. In America the Society has branches in each of the original thirteen States.

Among the great leaders of our Revolution who were original members of the Cincinnati may be mentioned Washington, Hamilton, LaFayette, Knox, d'Estaing, Rochambeau, Greene, Steuben, Benjamin Lincoln, the

*Steuben signed his name in America without the prefix *von*, though he was always called *de* Steuben in official documents.

two Pinckneys, John Paul Jones, de Grasse, McDougall, Putnam, Schuyler, Gates, James Monroe (afterward President), Moultrie, Kosciuszko, Lauzun, Fersen, Berthier, Anthony Wayne, Sullivan, Muhlenberg, Weedon, St. Clair, and "Light Horse Harry" Lee. President Pierce was an hereditary member. The first hereditary member admitted in the French branch was Lieutenant de Kalb, son of LaFayette's stout old Revolutionary comrade, Baron de Kalb, of Germany.

The *Institution* provided for the admission of a limited number of honorary members, men whose services and ideals were similar to those of the Cincinnati. Under this provision some of the most noted men of this and other countries have been elected to honorary membership, including Benjamin Franklin, Gouverneur Morris, Paca, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, Commodore Bainbridge, General Winfield Scott, Commodore Decatur, President Zachary Taylor, Daniel Webster, Generals Grant and Sherman, Admiral Farragut, President Cleveland, President Benjamin Harrison, President McKinley, Admiral Dewey, General Schofield, General Chaffee, President Theodore Roosevelt, President Taft, President Wilson, Generals Wood, Pershing and March (later an hereditary member), Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, Marshals Foch and Pétain, General Joffre, President Loubet, of France, Ambassador Jusserand, and His Majesty, Albert, King of the Belgians.

The most recent addition to this illustrious roll is the name of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the fifteenth President of the United States to wear the Eagle.

It is difficult for us today to see why there should have been any opposition to the Society of the Cincinnati, founded as it was to perpetuate the friendships of old soldiers and to afford a means of their helping each other and their families when in distress. However, there was at once a storm of criticism, chiefly on the part of politicians who, not having rendered military service, were not eligible for membership. The first attack came from an eccentric Irishman, Judge Ædanus Burke, of

South Carolina, whose book became the basis of the writings of Count de Mirabeau, the most violent of the critics of the Cincinnati. Burke saw visions of a "race of hereditary patricians and nobility." His pamphlet, "*Blow ye the Trumpet in Zion,*" was widely read. Burke wrote under the pseudonym "Cassius." He accused Steuben of having originated the Cincinnati. The most influential of the Society's opponents was Thomas Jefferson, though the Adamses—John, Samuel and John Quincy—were particularly hostile.

At the height of the excitement about the Cincinnati, Steuben wrote the following characteristic letter to Knox. It will be observed that the doughty old Baron disclaims the paternity of the hated Society, though he admits having taken a leading part in perpetrating the crime! The original letter is in the archives of the Society:

Schuylkill, November 11, 1783.

"A ça, Monsieur Le Cincinnatus! Your pernicious designs are then unveiled,—you wish to introduce dukes and peers into our republic? No, my Lord, no, Your Grace, that will not do: there is a Cassius more far-sighted than this German baron, of whom you have made a cat's paw to draw the chestnuts out of the fire. Cassius knows only a part of the secret. He makes me author and grand master, thus whipping you over my shoulders. But listen! I will prove to Cassius that this dangerous plan had its birth in the brain of two Yankees: i .e. Knox and Huntington: therefore

'Blow ye the Trumpet in Zion.'

"We know very well these Bostonians and the people of the Holy Land, who beneath a Presbyterian and modest air conceal the most ambitious designs. Cassius does not know all the danger. When I shall tell him that the young marquis Henry Knox is already promised in marriage to a Princess of Hyder Ali, and that the young Countess of Huntington is to marry the hereditary Prince of Sweden, that the King of

Spain wishes to accept the place of Treasurer of the Order, then

'Blow ye the Trumpet in Zion.'

"See the pamphlet of Cassius—read it—tremble!

"You have sent L'Enfant to France to procure some Gold Eagles: but you have forgotten to give him some coppers for his tavern expenses. Mr. R. Morris, General Greene, and myself have made a credit of six hundred dollars, without which the ambassador of the Order would have made his entree into the Philadelphia jail; but at present he is hunting for Eagles.

"Some discontented chevaliers who returned to France have for a long time declaimed against American honesty. To contradict this calumny, the royal corps has been sent to France, and, to engage them to employ their eloquence to speak well of us, they are sent without salt or meal. Judge what a fine picture they will draw of our republic! I hope Armand [Marquis de la Rouërie, commander of a legion in the Revolution] will also be sent as richly laden; and I assure you we are all well caricatured at the Horse-guards. Our reputation will be well established in France. As for Germany, that will be my affair. I love you too well, you American dogs, to speak all the evil of you that you merit. My respects to Madam, your wife.

I am yours,

STEUBEN.

The opposition to the Cincinnati was short-lived, for with Washington at its head it was idle for men to accuse it of dark plans against the democratic institution of the new government.

Steuben at all times took the greatest interest in the Cincinnati. Having taken up his residence in New York, he was elected Vice-President of the New York State Society of the Cincinnati in 1785 and its President in 1786. In that year he designed the flag of the New York Cincinnati, which in 1905 was adopted by the General

Society. It consists of thirteen light blue and white stripes, and in the canton of dark blue, the Eagle of the Cincinnati surrounded by thirteen stars. On July 4, 1786, under Steuben's direction there was arranged a most colorful ceremony of the presentation of the diplomas of membership. The following account of it appears in the minutes:

The foreign members and members of other State Societies, the spectators, kettle-drums and trumpets having occupied their places, Captain Isaac Guion, the Standard Bearer, escorted by four members all in full uniform wearing the Order of the Society, carried the standard into the hall and planted it in front, to the right of the steps of the Chair of State. The escort returning, the Society marched in procession into the Hall in the following order:

1st. Masters of Ceremony (Col. Webb and Major Giles)
2nd. Members (two by two)
3d. The Secretary (Capt. Pemberton, carrying the original institutions of the Society bound in light blue satin)
4th. The Treasurer and Deputy Treasurer (Col. Pierre van Cortlandt and Richard Platt, bearing the two white satin cushions containing the gold eagles and diplomas)
5th. The Vice-President (General Schuyler)
6th. The President (Baron Steuben)

At entering the room the members filed off to right and left, and were placed by the Masters of Ceremony, and remained standing before their seats. The Secretary was stationed behind a small table, covered with white satin, placed on the left in front of the steps of the State Chair. The Treasurer was placed on the steps, on the right of the President, supporting the cushion, on which were the Diplomas for the elected members, and the Masters of Ceremony took their places, one on the right of the Standard and the other on the left of the Secretary. At the entrance of the President, the Standard saluted, and the kettle-drums and trumpets gave a flourish, until he had taken his seat; then the Standard was raised and the members took their seats. The Masters of Ceremony were then

ordered to introduce the newly-elected members, who were placed on seats opposite the State Chair. The ceremony was opened by an oration delivered by Colonel Alexander Hamilton. After the Secretary had read the Institution, the President [Baron Steuben] addressed the Society and the newly-elected members. The President, rising from his seat, put on his hat, when all the members of the Society arose at the same time. The Master of Ceremonies conducted the Honorable Richard Morris, Chief Justice of the State, to the first step before the President, who asked him first, whether he desired to be received into the Society, and if so, to promise a strict observance to the Rules and Statutes just read. Upon answering in the affirmative, with one hand taking the Standard, he signed the Institution with the other. The President then taking one of the gold eagles from the cushion held by the Treasurer, presented it with these words: "Receive this mark as a recompence for your merit and in remembrance of our glorious Independence." The kettle-drums and trumpets then gave a flourish. The President then taking the Diploma, with the recipient's name inscribed, presented it to him, with the following words: "This will show your title as a member of our Society, imitate the illustrious hero, *Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus*, whom we have chosen for our Patron, like him be the defender of your country and a good citizen." Another flourish of trumpets. The President, then shaking hands with Chief Justice Morris, he was presented by the Master of Ceremonies to the Vice-President, and from him to all the members of the Society, who rose and saluted him, when he was assigned to a seat provided at the upper end of the room, taking rank above the members of the Society for the day only.

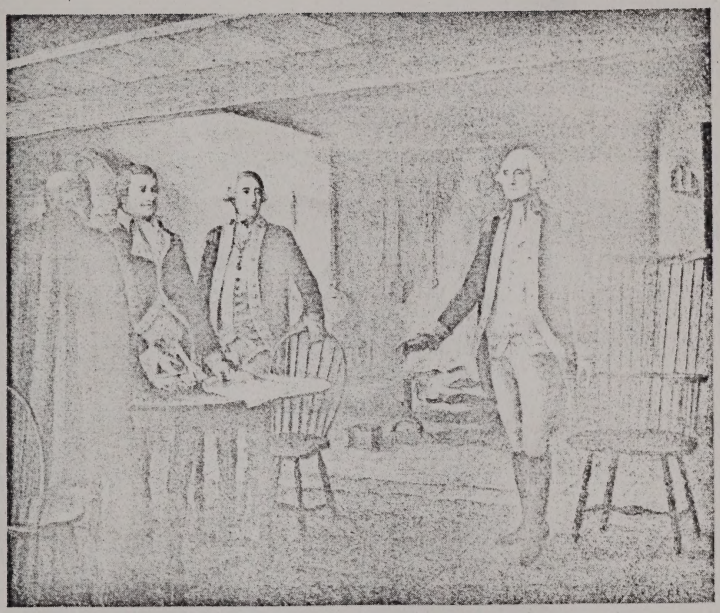
Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, the Hon. James Duane, Mayor of the city, William Duer, Secretary of the Treasury, and John Sloss Hobart, Judge of the Supreme Court, were then installed as honorary mem-

bers with the same form and ceremonies. After which they adjourned to the banqueting hall and there were more speeches, and toasts and lengthy conversation.

A ceremony such as this could hardly have been arranged by one without experience such as that of Steuben himself. It will be remembered that Steuben had been Grand Marshal of the Court of the Prince of Hohenzollern-Hechingen from 1764 to 1774. He was a Knight of the Order of Fidelity of Baden, the insignia of which he always wore with his Eagle of the Cincinnati.

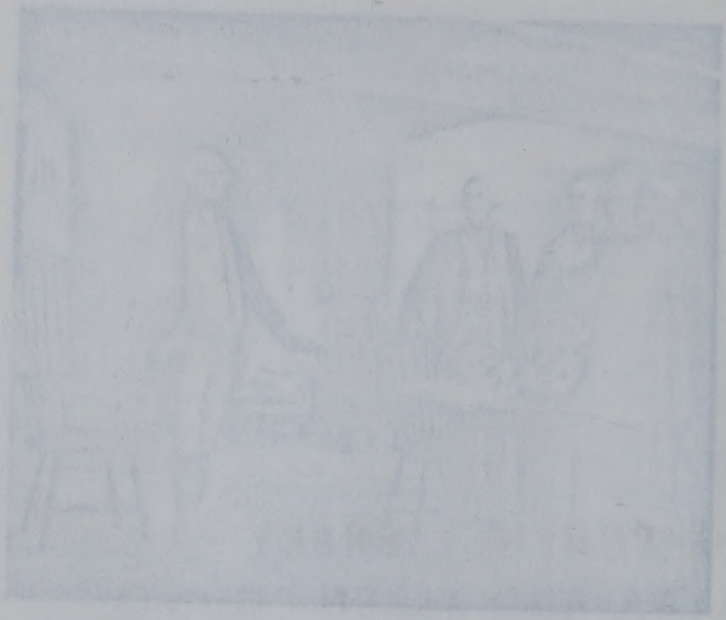
When Steuben died at Steubenville, New York, in 1795, unmarried, it was found that in his will he had excluded his "relations in Europe from any participation in my estate in America," and "adopted my friends and former aides-de-camp Benjamin Walker and William North as my children," making them "sole devisees of all my estates." These two officers were members of Steuben's beloved Society of the Cincinnati. Most appropriately their bas-reliefs, on either side of the Eagle of the Cincinnati, appear on the Steuben monument in LaFayette Park in Washington.

It is of interest to add that at the centennial of the victory of Yorktown, celebrated in 1881, six members of the von Steuben family were present as the guests of the Government. The son of one of them was born while his father was in America at the celebration, the child being christened James, among other names, in honor of his godfather, Secretary of State James G. Blaine. Fifty years later this Baron von Steuben was himself to attend the sesquicentennial celebration at Yorktown in 1931 as the guest of the United States. To him the Society of Cincinnati in the State of Virginia presented its Yorktown Commemorative Medal in memory of the great Steuben. Let us hope that members of the family will attend a bicentennial celebration at Yorktown in 1981!



Generals Heath, Steuben and Knox, inviting General Washington to become President of the Society of the Cincinnati, May 20, 1783.

Washington's headquarters at Newburgh-on-the-Hudson. Engraved by George Laurence Nelson, 1933. Drawn by permission of the Trustees of the Newburgh Museum.



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